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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly defines the term "remedial"; describes the remedial college student's problems with language; discusses writing processes and products in relation to a study recently conducted by the author and suggests remediation for students with problems; discusses affective domain concerns that operate in writing workshops and describes instruction at the Learning Center, a facility that provides instruction to college students in reading, writing, oral communication, and mathematics. Comments by students about writing are also included, and references about teaching and writing are cited. (LL)

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Individualizing Remedial Writing at the College Level

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CS 202 319

Individualizing Remedial Writing

Introduction

Remedial instruction is a concern not only of high school teachers, but also college teachers. This paper will(1) briefly define the term "remedial", (2) describe the remedial college student's problems with language, (3) discuss his writing process and products in a study that I conducted recently, (4) suggest remediation for problems posed by process and product, (5) discuss affective domain concerns that operate in writing workshops and (6) describe instruction at the Learning Center.

In this paper I will quote what students in a study that I conducted said about writing. They had been identified as ineffective writers by their teachers or me. The purpose of the study was to describe the writing processes and products of poor writers at three grade levels--seventh, tenth, and college.

In addition I will cite references about teaching and writing and will describe my experience as coordinating instructor of writing at the Learning Center, a facility that provides instruction to college students in reading, writing, oral communications, and mathematics.

The Term "Remedial"

What is remedial? To the teacher it may imply that she must provide instruction in some area that the student failed to master in an earlier grade. To the disadvantaged student it may mean that he is academically inferior to the student who gained admittance to college through regular, not special, admissions.

Ordinarily, the disadvantaged student does two things concurrently while in college -- improve his writing skills and master content; he must understand theories of learning for his psychology class and fluently express that understanding in writing on an essay test or paper for example; unlike the regular admissions' student, the disadvantaged student is usually severely weak in writing, reading, and study skills and this handicap limits him in his attempts to master content. If the student is enrolled in a college writing course, the teacher senses the anxiety and frustration he undergoes as he strives to become a better writer.

The student must learn not only how to organize his ideas into a logical, well developed essay but also avoid grammatical errors; while writing characterized by gross errors might be acceptable to the writing teacher sympathetic to the writer, outside the writing class such writing, no matter how expressive, is not likely to have a sympathetic audience. On the contrary, it might simply support undesirable stereotypes. (Hillocks, 1971, p. 627)

Problems with Language

In a study that I conducted in which college, tenth, and seventh grade students participated, I found that the students wrote the way they talked. One in particular was the college male who said that his English teacher commented on his papers that he wrote the way he spoke:

> ...you don't actually write the way you speak. That's what's a little bit more difficult about writing. I could probably say this and it would make perfect sense to somebody. But when it's put down on paper, it just doesn't make sense. Writing is really far [away] in relation to speaking...

(David, int. 1)

He was a verbal, fluent speaker with a rather impressive vocabulary, but a poor writer. To him his writing did not "sound right". He used gestures, pitch, intonation, and facial expressions when speaking. He failed to compensate for the lack of these when writing by using repetition for emphasis, paragraphing, punctuation, organization, key words, and underlining--methods to convey emphasis, tone, and rhythm in writing.

This observation about the student strengthens the theory that "writing (except in dialogue) is not speech written down; speech and writing have different syntax -- you can get away with fragments and run-on sentences

in speech that you can not in writing." (Hillocks, 1971, p. 609) Moreover, speech is composed of an "active" grammar while writing, a "passive" grammar -- a range of syntactic constructions that you seldom or never use in speech (unless you deliver a speech orally) but could possibly use in writing. (Minkoff & Katz, 1973, pp. 159-161) Examples of passive grammar are (1) relative clauses separated from antecedents (He felt much as an astronomer feels who has discovered a new planet.) (2) absolute constructions (The Red-Handed made no response, being better employed.) (3) infinitive phrases (...her resolution to turn his Saturday holiday into captivity at hard labor became adamantine...) (4) subject of concrete verbs (Monday morning found Tom miserable.) and (5) relative clauses as subjects (... Where the western boys got the idea that such a weapon could possibly be counterfeited to its injury is an imposing mystery...)

Furthermore, talking and writing differ in other aspects. A "talker" style is characterized by loose sentences, few parallel structures, use of active verbs, direct reference to the reader "you", contractions and closeness to the reader while "writer" style is characterized by periodic sentences, many parallel structures, use of passive verbs, no second person pronoun, no contractions, detachment and distance from the reader (Gibson, 1969, p. 57). The following passages illustrate these styles:

DAVID COPPERFIELD (Writer Style)

> Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began

to strike, and I began to cry simultaneously.

In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse and by some sage women in the neighborhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted, first that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts and spirits: both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender born towards the small hours on a Friday night. (Gibson, 1969, pp. 53-54)

HOLDEN CAUFIELD (Talker Style)

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don't feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth. In the first place that stuff bores me, and in the second place, my parents would have about two hemorrhages apiece if I told anything pretty personal about them. They're quite touchy about anything like that, especially my father. They're nice and all -- I'm not saying that -- but they're also touchy as hell. Besides, I'm not going to tell you my whole goddam autobiography or anything. I'll just tell you about this madman stuff that happened to me around last Christmas before I got pretty rundown and had to come out here and take it easy. (Gibson, 1969, p. 54)

[What are some observations we can make about Copperfield's uses of words that make him as a character distinct from Caulfield? Remember once more the opening sentence. "Whether I... or whether I... these pages must show." We have two fairly elaborate subordinate clauses, and then finally, at the very end of the sentence, comes the main subject-verb pattern. A sentence organized in this way is called a periodic sentence; it forces us to wait, in a kind of suspense, before we learn what the sentence is saying. It is of course a technique far more characteristic of writer-style than of talker-style. People simply do not speak casually to one another in periodic sentences; instead; they state their case immediately (subject-verb), qualifying it afterward with modifying phrases and clauses. That last sentence is a good example, and so is the one you are hearing right now. Such sentences are called loose.] (Gibson, 1969, pp. 54-55)

Usually, the remedial student relies on talking rather than writing to get a point across as one female said:

> ...I didn't think I had a writing problem until I came to college. Then I took an English course in composition and the teacher was actually shocked that I actually wrote this one piece of writing... He said if you could write the way you talk, then there would be no problem...I'd write the thing, and he just wouldn't get the meaning from it unless I sat down and told him what I had in mind... (Nina, int. 1, b.p.2)

and

> ...In talking I can always watch the other's expression and counteract misunderstanding...but when I'm writing I really have no way of knowing how somebody is going to react to my paper. I don't know who my audience really is...In writing I have so many ideas to express, but when I get them all down, they don't make any sense when somebody else reads them...(Nina, int. 1, b.p.5)

Since he relies more on radio, sound movies, and television to receive his information, instead of books (Eble, 1963, p. 33), he is likely to make aural errors in his writing (Eble, 1963, p. 33), use cliches and slang (Suhor, 1975, p. 159), shift registers inconsistently (Joos, 1961, pp. 23-38), use high context situations (Linn, 1975, p. 150) and ellipsis (Shopen, 1974, p. 785) in a piece of writing, the latter two being a type of writing in which the writer assumes that he and the reader share the same information and experiences. Consequently, the writer provides little if no background information. The following exchange points this out:

Investigator: Why didn't you give specific examples of how people talk, dress, and act in different religions?

Student: Because people already know. Every racial group had a religion that goes with it. (Arlene, int. 10)

The student believed that you don't tell people things you have reason to believe they already know. (Grice, 1967, unpublished lecture notes) "An important aspect of good style in writing and in speech has to do with decisions about determinancy or explicitness. One has to judge how much the audience knows and how much there is a need to tell them." (Shopen, 1974, p. 796).

The Writing Process and Product

Of the several dimensions of the composing process described by Emig (1971), my subjects experiencesd the most difficulty with prewriting, starting, and reformulation. (Emig, 1971, pp. 34-56)

For prewriting, the subjects rarely if ever used the time intervening (usually two to seven days) between receiving a stimulus to write (selecting their own topic and mode or being assigned one) and then writing about it at home or during the interview. They rarely thought about what they would say in a peice of writing. They answered "I forgot" and "I didn't think about it" when asked by me "Did you think about what you wanted to say today?" Instead of using days to think about what they would write, they frequently used five to ten minutes to think about, select an idea, plan and subsequently start to write. Usually the student placed the first element on the paper with difficulty, pondering where to start:

...me and the paper stare at each other wondering what will the pen put down...(Nina, int. 16)...and no words come (Nina, int. 9)

They proceeded the actual writing with comments like "I don't know what to write about" and questions like "Should I put a title? and "How long should it be?", the latter being discourse related questions.

As for reformulation, only the college students undertook it in all three phases -- correcting, revising, and rewriting. Both the male and the female attempted to eliminate discrete mechanical errors and stylistic infelicities (Emig, 1971, p. 43) with the male admitting that he could not locate and correct all of his errors.

> ...It's hard to censor what should be in there and what shouldn't... Not knowing where my mistakes are...is like playing the guitar wrong-- if no one ever told you that you were playing it wrong, you'd continue to play it wrong...(David, int.6, f.p.2)

In addition, both of the college students revised their pieces of writing, making major reorganizations and restructurings in a piece of writing. Usually, the second and subsequent drafts of each piece of writing were longer than the first draft. In their attempts to "be concise", a teacher directive to which they tried to adhere, they produced a paper opposite to this advice. They tended to give excessive detail, repeat themselves, use longer embellished phrases and ramble aimlessly -- attempting to make themselves clear to the reader.

Only the male rewrote, once when he felt that the writing "...wasn't going in the right direction..." (David, int. 5,9) and once when he seemed to feel that a firsthand biography of a friend was too revealling and decided subsequently to write about himself in an autobiographic incident. (Int. 9, 16)

Rewriting may be difficult for poor writers because (1) their ideas for writing do not come to them easily and (2) they are reluctant to discard the idea when they finally do select one and begin to write anew. They do not appear to have a resevoir of ideas from which to draw, especially if writing is frequently required:

> ...when school was in session, when writing assignments were due just about every week, it was like I drained all my resources of writing..At no time was I refreshed, I just kept writing, writing, and writing...Sometimes...you just burn out all your ideas for a while at least then you have to restore you head...(David, int.5, p.1)

How could the teacher alleviate problems with process? For the prewriting stage, she could ask students to write down at home or in class ideas that they might include in a piece of writing. Students would discuss these with the teacher and other class members. This jotting down of ideas should begin well in advance of the actual writing (at least a week) in order that students could have ample time to compile, amplify, and review their jottings. This method would somewhat facilitate starting because students would have compiled and discussed preliminary ideas and probably decided to write on one or several ideas. In discussion with his teacher and peers, he would have limitted his topic through a prewriting strategy (Kytle, 1970, pp. 380-385).

In correcting, the smallest task of reformulation, the teacher could use an oral approach. If a paper had many mechanical errors and few illogical organization aspects, she could (1) read the corrected paper, free of mechanical and syntactical errors into a tape recorder (2) ask the student

to take his uncorrected copy and edit as he listens. She could of course, adapt this procedure and edit with him. I have used both approaches at the Learning Center and written the assignment on the following lab form:

LEARNING CENTER
364 Christopher Baldy Hall
Amherst, New York 14260

LAB ASSIGNMENT SHEET

Student's name_____ _____ Assignment for the week of_____

Instructor's name_____ Course number_____ Section_____

ASSIGNMENT: (See item(s) checked or numbered below)

____Kit:_____

Section_____ Color_____

Work planned (explain briefly)_____

_____

____Text: _____

Pages and/or title_____

Work planned (explain briefly) _____

_____

____Device: (check)

____Filmstrip ____Cassette ____Controlled Reader ____Flash-X

____Headsets ____Tape Player

Name of accompanying material:_____

Work planned (explain briefly)_____

_____

____Instructor assignment: ____See attached (or) as explained below:

_____

_____

_____

For revising and rewriting, the more complex tasks, I have no solutions since the initial discontentment with a piece of writing and subsequent desire to improve it must evolve from the writer himself.

Until now, I have discussed process. Examination of the remedial student's writing products reveals several patterns. I have listed the most prevalent problems and proposed a sketchy solution.

Problem	Suggestion
1. Overuse of pejorative and honorific words and intensifiers (e.g., wonderful, great, fantastic, awful, terrible, stupid, very, really) (Gibson, 1969, p. 65) For example: My father is very gentle. (Macrorie, 1970, pp. 32-36)	Use words and phrases that "show" rather than "tell" (Macrorie, 1970, pp. 32-36). For example: My father walked to the far side of our pasture, found a cow with her newborn calf, and carried the calf home in his arms.
2. Abrupt introductions beginning with I am going to describe...", "I am going to write about...", "I am describing..." (Interview of subjects); abrupt conclusions like "...which is an illustration of the inequality so prevalent today." (Hall, 1973, p. 56)	Ease the reader into and out of the paper gracefully with adequate information; practice writing good introductions and conclusions. Abrupt introductions and conclusions "show a lack of confidence in our own writing and the reader's intelligence". (Hall, 1973, p.56)

3. Embellishment and fancy words (Hall, 1973, pp. 33-48); Nina, int. 2, *3, *8, 10, 11, *15)	Encourage students to use simple accurate words. Do exercises in diction, choosing the most accurate word from several options by using context clues in the sentence or passage.
4. Selection of a word that they can spell rather than the more accurate words that they cannot. (Hillocks, 1971, p. 609; Nina, int. 7, 8)	Tell students to use words that they can not spell but can put down a close approximation in the first draft. The teacher and the dictionary can help with spelling in sequent drafts.
5. Inconsistent use of "talker" syle, "writer" style, and register within a piece of writing; lack of awareness of audience, that is, who one is writing for.	Complete writing tasks (Moffett, 1973, pp. 1-500) in which the audience, situation, and characters are specified. Examine and discuss in class what characterizes speech and writing style with students completing several assignments using each style.

6. Predominance of simple sentences	Do sentence combining exercises (Strong, 1973, pp. 192-193 Christensen, 1969, pp. 1-239) which result in compound, complex, and complex-compound sentences with a variety of embeddings.
7. Use of sentences following the subject-verb pattern	Have the class discuss and analyze other types of sentence openers. (Corbett, 1971, p. 457)
8. Lack of transitional devices (Hagan, 1971, pp. 192-193)	Analyze intersentence relationships in selected passages in which the teacher has eliminated transitional devices and in student writing which lack transitions. Discuss what connectors would best express the proper relationship between the sentences and what pronouns and repetitions would need to be added to achieve clarity.

At the Learning Center, we attempt to tailor labs to fit individual needs. We assess the needs by (1) interviewing the student and asking him to diagnose his writing problem, (2) requiring a writing sample from each student during the first week of instruction and (3) having students write frequently in a variety of modes and giving them feedback during the semester. We use a

variety of approaches and materials towards writing, those mentioned previously representing a few of them.

The Writing Workshop

At one point or another I and other teachers have used the approaches listed and I have found that remedial college students resist participating in a writing workshop composed of four or five members whose purpose is to read, respond to, and comment about each member's writing piece.

Inevitably, a college writing class is composed of a range of writing abilities -- from the student who has difficulty putting a sentence together to the student who needs a few suggestions about how to polish his writing. As a result of this wide range, the writer on the lower end of the spectrum is mortified when anyone except the teacher reads his poorly written pieces. Even when he submits his papers to the teacher, he proceeds to apologize with comments like "I'm a terrible writer", "I could have done better", "I've been out of school for a long time" --comments designed to cushion the teacher's shock before she reads his "terrible" paper. Since he usually is ashamed when the teacher alone reads his papers, his shame is compounded by each peer who views his products. He feels that somehow his worth is measured by his production. In his mind and often in his peers' minds, errors have become synonymous with ability; poor writing products equal incompetence. Thus the better writers in the class verbally or nonverbally convey an attitude that the disorganized, fragmented sequence of ideas equals faulty, immature thinking ("You wrote that!"); the misplaced modifier, a misplaced and unrealistic career goal ("How can you think that you're going to be a _____ with this writing. You'd better settle for _____,

choose another profession."). One female college student summarized her sentiment about the writing workshop:

> ...In a [workshop] situation. I'm a lot more uneasy. I'm more concerned about how a particular teacher will perceive me, how my peers will perceive my writing products...I work better with the one to one [situation] and I speak a lot more because when I'm in class with other peers, I'm on display...and you got to be on your toes and ready for ridicule...(Nina, int. 15; see also int. 13)

The better writer also resists writing workshops. He wants to read models of good writing; he is insulted to read other students' papers filled with "errors". He fears that if he reads poor writing, he, who knows the "basics", will be "contaminated"; he dreads backsliding into the morass of "bad writing". Furthermore, he does not perceive his role as a critic of his peers' writing. Rather, he desires to become a self-critic, seeking training for this skill and advice from the teacher, a professional, not other students. Thus, he feels that the teacher alone can help him, not peers whose writing is worse than his own.

Moreover, the student views writing workshops with suspicion because he must "pretend" that (1) the teacher is just another student in the group (2) the assignment will not be submitted -- so be honest! (3) he really respects other student's comments and criticisms (4) he has opinions about writing that exclude grammatical jargon (5) the assignment has no deadline (6) he is not in competition with other students (7) his peers are not trying to denigrate him before the teacher, showing her how much they know and how little he does and (8) he will not be graded by his writing products at the end of the semester.

Equally important, the student critic has internalized our jargon, our poor attitudes toward mistakes in writing, and our merciless wielding of the correction pen across a student's paper; he is more likely to make oral or written comments concerning grammar and mechanics, usually ignoring ideas, organization and flavor. I quote one student here:

> [This is]...not good writing because the sentences are choppy... [The second sample]...is bad writing because of the sentence structure...misspelling, low level style of writing...The first sentence is a run-on...(Nina, int. 4, p. 2)

What the student says about a peer's writing product and what we want him to say conflict. Undue criticism by peers discourages meaningful dialogue among the writers; it "stamps out the originality and feeling expressed in student writing" (Alley, 1974, p. 380). Left unchecked, such an atmosphere breeds anxiety and sometimes hostility. Consequently, the poor and the better writer seem content to write for an audience of one, the teacher. This attitude is difficult if not impossible for the teacher to change.

The Learning Center

At the Learning Center the students write during the first week of classes in order that the teachers can assess each student's writing weaknesses and strengths. Each teacher then plans an initial instructional strategy and adapts it as he examines the student's subsequent writing pieces.

We use a variety of methods and materials to enable each writer to overcome some writing dysfunction. We encourage the students to regard first attempts as first drafts, not the finished product; we give them time in class and out of class to let their ideas germinate and ripen. We encourage reformulation as an opportunity for students to rethink, restructure and

refine ideas. It takes time for good pieces of writing to develop and we give them just that. "Almost all professional writers suggest that a period of incubation occur between the first draft and the final revision. During this stage in the rhetorical process, the writer's mind turns elsewhere; his composition and its impending revision appear to become dormant in his thinking. However, while the studnet's attention is turned elsewhere, his preconscious processes automatically take over and continually operate upon the future task of revision" (Alley,1974, p. 379).

In addition, we try to avoid excessive reading about writing instead of actually writing; writing books tend to be too prescriptive. Instead we want students to learn by doing.

While the writing skills we teach are sometimes elementary and basic, we must remember that we are working with students who are adults, who have had the experience of adults, the aspirations of adults, the emotions of adults, and the intelligence of adults.

We are, however, realistic enough to know that for the poor writers, we can not eradicate writing disability in one semester or even two. Exposure to our courses will not alleviate all the writing problems of each student because his writing problems are not only numerous but sometimes severe.

We do, however, provide the student with successes at writing, hoping that hese successes will encourage him to become more conscientious in improving his writing. This is basically what we are about -- raising consciousness levels -- showing the student that to become a better writer requries both effort and time, showing the student what his weaknesses are so that he can attack them, showing him that writing is not only a means of

expressing an opinion, but also a means of writing about experiences which deeply interest or trouble him (Alley, 1974, p. 379) and developing a personal style.

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